Trope: Arranged Marriage AU (Hannigram AU)

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/14941899.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Beverly Katz, Robert Lecter, Chiyoh (Hannibal), Francis Dolarhyde, Brian Zeller, Freddie Lounds, Dr. Frederick Chilton
Additional Tags:	Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Omega Verse, Alpha/Omega, Alternate Universe - Arranged Marriage, Alternate Universe - Royalty, Alpha Will, Omega Hannibal, betrothal, Age Difference, sassy bratty Will, pompous Hannibal, time jump - six years later, outlaw Prince Will, Prince of the Woods, usurping King Francis, Manipulative Hannibal Lecter, Reunions, Plotting, Wedding, Wedding Night, Masturbation, slick, Vaginal Fingering, Hand Jobs, Heart-to-Heart, Getting to Know Each Other, References to Knotting, Manipulative Will Graham, coup, Canon-Typical Violence, Time Skips, Happy Ending, another wedding, Mpreg, Pregnant Sex, Outdoor Sex, Knotting, Podfic Welcome, do not copy to another site, Multisex Omega
Language:	English
Series:	Part 23 of Trope Trope: Exploring fic tropes in an Omegaverse setting, Part 55 of ABO/Omegaverse Fics by TigerPrawn, Part 39 of Tiger's Hannigram AU fics
Collections:	Will In The Woods, Favorite Readings
Stats:	Published: 2018-06-15 Completed: 2018-09-15 Words: 21,533 Chapters: 5/5

Trope: Arranged Marriage AU (Hannigram AU)

by TigerPrawn

Summary

The alpha son of the King, Prince Will was betrothed to the omegan Count Hannibal Lecter at birth. Will prefers fishing and running free in the woods, Hannibal prefers music and literature. But a clash of personalities may turn out to be the least of their problems.

Notes

Inspired by Electra's Will In The Woods challenge, this fic popped into my head. So I wrote this chapter today and have the rest all planned out and will post up soonish (hopefully weekly) - featuring more woods lol.

Chapter 1

“Will, come down. The Count is at the palace.”

Will’s ears perked up and he turned on the branch so he could look down at his ever capable aide, Bev Katz, who had tracked him in the woods. Not that she looked very amused by it.

He heard her mutter under her breath - “Don’t you think I have better things to do than reeling in your sorry ass.”

“What was that?” Will asked with a teasing grin but received only a frown from his fellow alpha. She was a few years older than his fifteen years - a good relatable age, his parents had hoped. He’d already driven two older aides into early retirement. He liked that she didn’t take his nonsense, but that didn’t stop him giving it.

Will was still grinning as he swung down from the tree, dropping gracefully in front of Bev.

He spent a lot of time in the palace woods, had done since he was a child, and Bev was the only one so far who had managed to successfully track him.

“Robert’s come to say goodbye?” Will asked as they started to walk, the taller alpha plucking twigs out of his unruly curls as they made for the palace.

“No, his nephew.” She said plainly.

Robert Lecter was a good friend of his father, the King, and an important noble at court. He was an envoy to the east and had even taken a bride in the country he had settled. Will always enjoyed his visits, because his father would make the time for them all to go fishing. Which, usually was fun. This time, not so much, as Robert had brought along his nephew - Hannibal, also a Count in his own right now that he was of age. He was several years older than Will,

and the omega was a bore. He did not like to fish or do much outdoors at all. He preferred books and music and other *gentlemanly pursuits* - as he had once told Will - clearly a jibe.

Will stopped in his tracks at Bev's words.

"Ugh. No, I'm going back to the woods." He started to turn and Bev grabbed hold of him and turned him forward to the palace again.

"Nope. I'm on orders from the King. No escape this time little prince." She kept an arm linked in his as they walked, allowing him no way out without resorting to fisticufs. "You can go back to running wild like a pixie once he leaves."

"Pixie!" Will gave an indignant grunt and Katz's grin at the reaction didn't go unnoticed.

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"He's in the woods?" Hannibal asked, uncertain if he'd heard correctly.

"Yes my lord. He spends most freetime there." The aide replied, looking a little sheepish.

"He behaves like some sort of wild animal." Hannibal muttered, balking when he heard a booming laugh in response and realised the King had entered the room and heard his remark.

"Oh, he is. But what alpha isn't at that age? I myself spent a good deal of my childhood in the same woods." The King grinned as he held out his hand.

Hannibal took it and kissed the back of it before letting go, trying to ignore the heat in his cheeks at his disdain being overheard.

"Thank you for coming Hannibal. I know you and your uncle are leaving shortly, but as it could be some time before you return, I thought it would be appropriate to… make plans…"

Hannibal clenched his jaw. He had been dreading this conversation for as long as he could remember.

When Prince Will was born an alpha, arrangements were made. Their families were close and it would have been a good match for any of the nobility, and so it had been sealed between them. Hannibal remembered as a young child being introduced to the baby who would grow up to be his alpha. And now, with Will a teenager, time was fast passing by and with three years until he would be expected to wed, this discussion had to happen.

"Of course." Was all Hannibal could manage.

As an omega of noble birth, he had never expected to marry for love, or be given the option to not marry at all. But living overseas with his uncle for so many years had given him a taste of what it might be like to have no such concern.

"The thing is, and this is very delicate you realise, Will-" The King started but was cut off by the door opening and admitting the young Prince and his aide.

Will was very handsome for his age, and Hannibal could see that when he reached adulthood, he would be exquisite. Perhaps when he was a few years older the age difference would see less stark too - Hannibal wondered. Though quite common - some even greater than the difference between he and Will - as a child it had always felt a marked thing whenever they met. Will's interests and personality were at an earlier stage than his own, but perhaps once he was an adult too that would level out. Because, at this moment, the boy in front of him was nothing more than an annoyance.

He wanted to ask the King to continue with what he was saying, but it was unseemly to speak in such a way to his highness, so Hannibal merely waited and bore Will's disgruntled and petulant glare with as much grace as he could muster.

"Will. Here then," the King clapped the prince's back and then squeezed his shoulder. "Count Hannibal is to leave us shortly, but…"

Hannibal was surprised when Will's expression eased into something more genial and he held out a hand to shake, showing his courtly upbringing, despite the twigs in his hair. "It was a pleasure to see you and your uncle again Count, please give my very best to Count Robert."

Hannibal accepted the hand and shook it, a little surprised but somewhat relieved that Will did not do as most alpha's did, and turned his hand to lay a kiss on it instead.

Will gave a curt nod and released his hand before stepping back.

"I plan to fish today father, if I have your leave to go?" he gave a slight bow.

Hannibal saw the King's hesitation, the look of concern on his face as he declined Will's request and asked that they all take a seat. In that moment Hannibal understood the situation - Will did not know about the betrothal.

This was going to be a painful conversation for them all.

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"Will!" Bev called but he ignored her, moving on the branch little enough to send a shower of nuts down onto her. "Your father is going to- ugh..."

The mention of his father made Will's blood boil. "The *King* is lucky I don't renounce the throne!"

Bev chortled and it made Will's face burn red. He moved enough to peer at her down through the thick branches, enough to glare.

"Come on Will… Your mother wants your company for dinner."

Will huffed. He was mad at the Queen too but could never really hold any kind of hostility towards her long.

"Why didn't they tell me?" The words came out with an edge of sadness.

“Who knows. The King has his own ways, he must have thought this for the best. But it is done now. You must learn to live with it.” Bev said firmly.

Will’s jaw tightened and he scoffed, biting back angrily - “learn to live with it?! *It* being a pompous, stuck up omega who thinks himself better than the Prince because he prefers instruments chopped and made from trees rather than the beauty of the living and vital things that they are.” He was near shouting the words as his anger rose. “He is a shallow prig who-”

“Will!” Katz near bellowed his name in admonishment before he could continue, though why she cared so much to defend the boring Count was beyond him.

He huffed and looked back down, to see her glaring up at him… the Count suddenly by her side.

Will let out a heavy sigh and closed his eyes as he sat back against the bough. How much had the Count heard? Not that it mattered, it was all true. Though his family raised him better than to be rude about someone like that. He probably should apologise, but was too busy glowering at the leaves in front of him, wondering if he could set them alight with his mind and make Katz and the Count flee in response.

“It’s quite alright.” He heard Hannibal gently reassure Katz. “He has had a shock today. And I am secure enough in my own person not to be troubled by the insults of petulant teenagers.” The Count spoke smoothly, perhaps even a touch amused.

Will snarled and twisted, allowing himself to drop between the branches, catching one to right himself so he could land on his feet before the pair.

Hannibal quirked a brow, looking somewhat impressed by the gymnastics for a fleeting moment before his expression leveled out.

“I thought you were leaving.” Will growled.

Hannibal looked thoroughly bored with him and Katz had moved a respectful distance away.

“I will be shortly. I wished to speak with you, without your father present. If you’d care to take a stroll?”

Will wanted to respond emphatically not, but the jibe about his adolescent behaviour made Will want to prove a point in not acting that way. “Yes. Certainly.” He ground out between his teeth.

Hannibal gave a nod and started towards the fishing lake at the edge of the woods, leaving Will to fall into step beside him as Katz brought up the rear.

They walked silently for several minutes before the lake came into view and Hannibal began to speak, not looking at Will but continuing to take in the scene -

“This is a beautiful place. Strange to think that this will one day be my home. The woods are certainly beautiful, I can see their appeal.”

Will felt like the omega was trying to placate him, which wasn't to say that it wasn't working.

"Your Highness, I did not realise until this day that you were unaware of the betrothal between us." Hannibal said quiet but firm.

Will nodded. That much had been clear by how uncomfortable the omega had been in witnessing the King break the news to him. The scene came back to him and he felt his cheeks flush with embarrassment as he remembered his reaction.

"I apologise for anything I said in the heat of that moment." Will forced out. "It was not fair of me to lay any of the blame on you."

"Quite." Hannibal agreed. "I was much younger than you are now when I was first told. It never entered my mind that this was a secret from you, but it also would never have been my place to reveal that secret, had I known."

Hannibal got to the edge of the lake and stopped, looking down into the reeds at the fish glinting near the surface.

"Yes." Will agreed. "I… I'm sorry." He apologised again, but this time truly meaning it. If the news had been hard for him, he wondered what the omega might have made it, growing up knowing it.

Hannibal turned to him and smiled. "All is forgiven your Highness. I can't imagine the shock it must have been for you. I have lived with it my entire life and it is often a shock to me." He let out a low chuckle that made Will actually feel a little sad for him.

"You… Hoped for a different alpha?" Will wondered aloud, as a teenager might.

Hannibal shook his head. "I hoped for nothing. It isn't my place to hope. And I never knew anything different. Your Highness-"

Will cut him off with a wince and held up his hand. "Please, it feels ridiculous you calling me that. If we are to be… we should be… you should call me Will."

Hannibal bowed his head. "Of course. Will, when we next see each other it will likely be our wedding day, and I would hate for it to be clouded with anger and hatred. I want us to part friends today, at the least."

Will let out a bark of laughter. "Friends? You can't stand me. And I… well, you already heard what I think about you." Will was surprised when Hannibal's face broke into a mirror of his own grin.

"Quite so." Hannibal agreed. "But I am hoping that you will be much more amiable as an adult than you have been as a child. It would be difficult for you to be less amiable."

Will narrowed his eyes and thought seriously about pushing the omega into the lake. He is drawn from the thought by Hannibal's low chuckle.

“Whatever you’re thinking, don’t. I maybe omegan, but I am six years your elder and much bigger than you. I assure you any wrestling would end in my favour.”

Will’s eyes widened. He was sure Hannibal meant nothing by the words and yet the image they conjured in his teenage mind was enough to make him instantly hard. He blushed, his face burning red as he turned to look at the lake, hoping the omega had noticed neither the blush nor the bulge in his pants. Hannibal was attractive for his age, angular cheekbones and a lithe build. He knew the omega had no interest in him now, as a teen, but the thought that one day they would both be adults and free to explore each other’s body drew a whine from him.

“Are you well?” Hannibal asked, concern laced with a knowing tone.

Had he used that phrasing purposefully? What a sly thing the omega was - Will should take note of that.

“I was merely thinking of the wedding day, it will be a harrowing occasion.” Will managed to sound completely unflustered as he snapped his response.

“Quite so.” Hannibal chuckled.

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Hannibal enjoyed the sway of the carriage as it pulled from the palace grounds. It was almost soothing and he thought he might end up able to sleep for some of the journey back to the port where his uncle already awaited him.

The day had been… interesting. After meeting with the King he had replayed the handful of times he had met the Prince in the past, now knowing that he had been unaware of their betrothal. The boy was still a wild brat, but Hannibal had perhaps formed opinions and assumptions that he might not have had he been aware that the betrothal was not known to the Prince.

As a result, it felt like their moment by the lake was the only real interaction they’d had. It was promising. They seemed to have very little in common and yet, what Will had said about the vitality of living trees had made him smile. It had spoken to him and gave him hope that there was some common ground they could find in time. Perhaps they should write to each other in these intervening years? That might be helpful.

And, Hannibal had to admit, the way he had made the alpha blush had been very amusing. Such easy prey in the teenager, he wondered if he could draw such a blush in few years time. How pleasant it might look on the adult face of the Prince.

Hannibal drifted off to the pleasant thoughts and didn’t wake until the carriage pulled up at the port.

His mood was immediately brought down as his uncle approached, looking harried.

“We must board, Hannibal. We are leaving immediately.” Robert was already signalling to the footman to secure their bags.

“Something is wrong?” Hannibal asked, concerned by Robert’s behaviour - so out of character for the usually calm man.

Robert pointed out beyond the port to the open sea. An armada approached.

Six Years Later

Hannibal folded the letter back into the envelope sank back into the chair.

“My lord?” Chiyoh moved forward, clearly concerned.

Hannibal took a care to level his expression, it would do no good to panic the staff. It might mean nothing, perhaps the despot King wanted to be assured of his allegiance in the wake of Count Robert’s passing.

“I have been called to court.” He said coolly.

“Oh.” Chiyoh hesitated and then gave a curt nod. “Will you go?”

“I don’t see that I have a choice.”

She gave another nod and rang a bell for the servants - Chiyoh would organise it all very well, he knew. Packing and the plans for his voyage could be left in her capable hands.

So instead his thoughts turned elsewhere - first thought to the continued care of his household, safely ensconced in the east. His second was for the young alpha he had once been betrothed to - perhaps he would finally learn the Prince’s fate.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Hannibal arrives at Court and plans begin to form...

The voyage was both too long and too short. Hannibal, though as outwardly calm as his upbringing had instilled in him, was brimming with anxious anticipation.

It had been a full six years since he and his uncle had left the kingdom of Balta just as the armada had arrived. The attack had been unexpected and the reports had it that the battle was over quickly. Any thanks they'd had for being out of range of the ships as they left harbour, were quelled by the sadness at the great losses the city suffered.

Count Robert had received an envoy from the palace some weeks later, saying that Francis, King of Missou now ruled Balta. Robert had been compelled to transfer his allegiance and in doing so, they had been allowed to stay in the East and continue as they had been.

But it was not how things had been. There felt a constant threat hanging over them that had only worsened since they day Count Robert had unexpectedly passed. The malady had been swift and taken him quickly, leaving Hannibal in his stead short months earlier. Hannibal of course had sent word to the court of the King, and the letter was the response - a request for him to come to Court, for reasons that were not plainly put.

Hannibal wrung his hands as he looked over the port that had once been familiar to him, but as his ship pulled closer, he might as well have been a stranger.

The livery flown was that of the Red Dragon of Missou, large parts of the port had been rebuilt - no doubt after having been destroyed by bombardment.

The part of the town that had once been close to the port was no more - now instead of houses and merchant shops, flattened ground held a market place.

Hannibal's eye was drawn up through the town and to the Palace on the hill. It wasn't as understated as it once had been - in the intervening years turrets and walls had been added. The welcoming openness of the palace gardens now hidden behind stark ramparts. A very different type of rule.

As the ship sailed into port, Hannibal's sense of dread rose.

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"Will, come down. The Count is at the palace."

“Count Robert?” Will moved quickly from the tree, dropping in front of Katz and talking hold of her shoulders. “What news?”

She shook her head - “Hannibal.”

Will let out a deep sigh of concern for Robert. It was only tempered by knowing that Hannibal was safe and in his kingdom once more. They had not been close, but as with any good alpha - and Prince no less - Will had felt the weight of responsibility for the man’s life the moment he discovered their betrothal. Any injury to Count Hannibal Lecter was an injury to the Prince, and his pride as an alpha.

But also… the last conversation they’d had, beside the lake only hours before the Palace was attacked, had warmed him to Hannibal. Even to the idea that they would be mated and bonded. They had little in common and the omega was very annoying, but he was beautiful and Will was not ignorant of his good qualities. He had merely elected to ignore them in his childishness. That day at the lake, as he stood thinking over the situation once Hannibal had left, was the day he felt he finally became a man. Not just the day, but in that exact moment he had grown up.

And then the attack had come and being in the woods, considering this at the lake-side, had been what saved him. Katz and a number of the Palace guard and staff stole away with him, as much as he wanted to fight them and return to his father’s side - he had grown up and knew the impetuousness would get him killed. If he wanted to fight another day, on even ground, he was better off alive.

Katz jerked her head back towards the hidden encampment. “Brian has returned, go back to camp, I’ll take over watch here.” Katz was already starting towards the tree, climbing up into one of the several hidden nests that surrounded the camp.

Will nodded and took off at a trot, weaving through the thick woods that even his childhood spent in trees had prepared him little for. The Great Forest at the edge of what had once been his father’s kingdom had been home for the Prince and his court for six years and yet it still held it’s dangers. The trees were dense and more than once one of his entourage had been turned around and lost for days. Those even less familiar often never returned once lost. It had been the only place deemed safe to harbour their band.

The camp was a sprawl of thicket hidden tents and treetop apartments and hideaways. There were hidden defenses and traps at the perimeter, and look out nests strategically placed a little further off. There was a communal gathering area at the very centre that was much like how elves or pixies might hold a court - roughly hewn wooden benches and tables. It was the work of many years and it was home.

When Will entered the circular clearing, Brian Zeller, bowed low - a cunning grin.

“I return Prince of the Woods.”

Will grinned and clasped Brian’s offered arm. “So good to see you in one piece.”

Each time one of them left, Will feared for their safety. Even so, Brian - once part of the King's honour guard - was capable and clever. He made frequent trips to the capital, dressed as a trader and returning with supplies and gossip from both townsfolk and other travelling merchants.

"News of Count Robert?" Will asked, hopeful.

When the canons had first unleashed a fiery assault on the city, Will had assumed the boat of the Count to have been sunk or captured. It was a year or more later that Brian discovered through idle gossip, that many of the ships leaving port that day had done so before the armada came into range - the Count's envoy had left unharmed. Will had lived in hope of seeing his old family friend again.

Brian's face fell a little. "I have reliable word that Count Robert has passed. His nephew has been called to court and arrived a week ago. I didn't see him myself, but the market place was abuzz with the news."

Will nodded. He hated talk of that damn market - a farce. Where merchants had once occupied that area, the houses and shops had been razed to the ground and replaced with a market controlled by Missou's office of commerce. The townsfolk had become impoverished with the economy under the King's direct control - a people too starved to fight would never challenge his power.

Will sometimes wished he could have taken the whole town with him that night.

But that was impossible, and now he could only peck annoyingly at the man who sat on the throne that should be his.

As long as he lived, Francis of Missou would have a constant war from these woods. Every man he sent was cut down, every royal shipment that attempted passage through was robbed. Each item taken apart of parcelled together and sent to those who needed it the most. Under the guise of donations from a benefactor to the Priestesses, their church was able to provide for the sick and poor as long as Will and his band continued to supply them.

For long years Will had considered this wasn't enough. To be Prince of the woods, as they jested, was less than his people deserved no matter how he might try to help them. But with a bounty on his head, and an army too small to be nothing more than an irritant, he had no idea how he might do more.

"It… is good to know Hannibal is alive." Will allowed, and Brian's grin grew once more.

"I should imagine he is a fine and beautiful omega, if his last trip to the Palace is anything to go on. But…" Brian was a picture of that young scoundrel who had teased the prince mercilessly, often whilst the king chuckled. But then his expression darkened. "It matters not. He will have his allegiance to King Francis whether he gives it freely or not."

For a moment it seemed as though Brian were going to say more, but changed his mind. Will was grateful, because he knew he was likely to voice the same thought that had entered Will's head - perhaps the King sought a mate.

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Hannibal looked out of the window in the chambers he had been given. They overlooked the fishing lake, and couldn't help but stir memories within him. He couldn't pretend that he'd had any of the deep feelings an omega might develop for their betrothed - but that wasn't to say he hadn't thought about the future they might have had. At the least, he wouldn't have wish harm on any of the royal household and had been truly crushed to hear the fate of the King all those years ago. There was an echo of that sadness now that he returned to this place - familiar and changed at the same time.

He was a good man, a fine ruler who had created a prosperous kingdom. So much so that the temptation to conquer it was clearly too great to resist for one such as Francis of Missou.

As if on cue, the door opened and a small number King's guard spilled into the chambers followed by King Francis himself.

"I could have come to you, your Highness." Hannibal said as Francis strode in and looked Hannibal up and down. A cruel smile grew on the man's face at the break in propriety.

"It is not done to speak first in the presence of the King." Francis growled.

Hannibal bowed his head a little, a show of deference, but he kept his thoughts to himself - it wouldn't benefit anyone for him to challenge whether Francis should be considered King - of Balta at least.

"Forgive me sire, I merely meant that I had come all this way, I could attend you in court any time you wished."

"I… prefered somewhere private for this discussion." Something flashed in the King's eyes that filled Hannibal with a cold dread.

He hadn't considered before that this was anything other than some necessity of Court since his uncle's death. But now, he feared that the King wanted much more -

"In the last six years I have ruled well over the people here, truly they have no complaints. And yet, complain is all they do. They have food, they have shelter, but apparently that isn't enough." His anger bubbled through like a petulant child and Hannibal found it distasteful. "They don't accept my rule as they should. So… I seek legitimacy - in their eyes." He spat the last and looked disgusted at the very idea. This was likely a proposal of his aides.

Given the clear ruination of the populace, Hannibal could understand why this idea had been conjured, but it likely would do no good. The people of the kingdom were not stupid - a royal wedding to a familiar noble of court would not sooth them.

"You wish to take a mate that the people will see as legitimizing your claim to the throne. A noble from… before your-"

"And I am compelled to choose you." Francis sneered. "There are still people at court who would be better options than dragging you back half way across the world." Francis ground

out the words as an angry growl that made Hannibal suspect he was not an avid fan of this course of action.

“Then, why-” Hannibal should have known better than to begin to question the King.

As it was the man roared and strode towards him, stopping short just as Hannibal thought he might take hold of him and fling him against the window. His words came out as a bellow -

“Do not question the King.”

Hannibal did not flinch. Refused to flinch.

There was a moment of cold silence before the King leaned in and snarled out - “you’re not legitimacy, you’re bait.”

The words sank in and a shudder went through Hannibal - bait for Will. Francis must know of the betrothal. It filled him with a cold dread, but also gave Hannibal leave to hope in that moment, that Prince Will must still be alive.

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“Will, you need to think about this.” Bev told him as he strapped the saddle bags onto his horse.

“I have Bev, you know I have.” Will huffed. For a time, when the kingdom had first fallen and before news became readily available once more as the chaos settled - the Lecters were thought to have perished. That Hannibal was now in Balta filled Will with a strange mixture of dread and need. A need to know what happened to the omega that was to have been his mate.

“We should find out why they brought him here. It could even be a trick of some kind.” She pushed.

“I know. I’ve thought about that, all kinds of scenarios, but it doesn’t matter. If we weren’t betrothed then the Count wouldn’t be in this situation. They would have let him be, he has more value in the East should Francis wish to continue conquering.”

“This might have nothing to do with the betrothal. It wasn’t exactly common knowledge.” Bev continued to try and talk him down.

It wasn’t, she was right. But he knew Francis knew because the papers pertaining to it - drawn up between his father and Count Lecter on the day of his birth - were on the King’s desk when the attack happened. Will, in an attempt to get his head around it all, had asked for them to be brought from the archives to see them for himself. He’d not had the chance to look upon them as he had never returned to the Palace from the woods after the interlude by the lake.

“You… Will, you can’t take responsibility for everyone-”

“I can.” Will rounded on her with a glare, a commanding tone to his voice. “I am their… I should have been their King. I should have done more.”

Bev took a sudden hold of his shoulders and gave him a jolt. “Don’t. Don’t do that. You were fifteen Will, there was nothing you could have done.”

His jaw tightened at the words she had said to him many times over the years. Every time when she felt he was taking too much onto his shoulders. He had learned not to argue, but it didn’t mean he felt the weight any less. The weight of an entire kingdom that should have been his and he failed it with every passing day that he allowed Francis to reign.

As if reading his mind, Bev sighed - “You don’t command an army Will. There are less than a hundred of us and half of those are palace servants. Sure, a few of the King’s Guard but half of those again are too old or frail to be much use now. We’ll find a way, some day we will, and until then we just keep you safe and ready.”

He nodded, dismissing her rather than agreeing with her, but she stood fast as he continued to prepare his horse. After a few minutes she moved to the edge of what passed as their stables, and started to grab some tack for her horse.

“Well, if you insist on this, then I guess I’m coming too.” She sighed dramatically and he smiled as he continued quietly.

He hadn’t been to the capital for a long while, and always in disguise - as he would go now. Perhaps Bev was right, he could send more reconnaissance, they still had a few people loyal in the palace that some word could be cautiously given to and from. He could stay safely at camp whilst someone else brought back news of Hannibal.

But that wouldn’t do. He needed to see the omega with his own eyes.

By the early evening, with darkness drawing in, Will, Bev and a small number of their company, entered the capital as traders. They took rooms at the inn near the port, as they had enough times over the years that this was nothing of note. Come morning they would happen upon one of their allies in the market and learn what they could. But for Will, he was already determined - news was not enough. He would make his way into the Palace woods - a place as familiar to him as the palace itself - and from there he could safely watch and glimpse the omega for himself.

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Every day became much like the last.

He was allowed the freedom of the Palace and grounds for the most part, but prisoner enough not to be allowed beyond that. He saw the King on occasion, a meal here or there. Otherwise he was joined only by a few other nobles or dignitaries, or sometimes took meals in his room and did not leave it for the whole day - choosing to gaze out at the lake.

Oh, what a different view that might have been. Had the attack never happened he might well have sat in this same window seat, but instead of lamenting the past, he might be thinking of

the future. Perhaps a child in his arms.

It was a fleeting and wistful thought. Easier to deny than the feelings instilled in him by the few minutes by the lake. Will had been almost an adult then and their future wasn't entirely beyond imagination. He gleaned more of the boy's personality in those minutes than he had over the years of infrequent visits. He almost regretted it, for he would perhaps have cared less for the Prince's fate had they not spoken candidly that day.

These intrusive thoughts came and went over the days since he had come to the Palace - since that first day when Francis had explained his plans for Hannibal and the knowledge that came with it - that Will was alive and with that was hope. And with that hope an idea took root in his mind and began to flourish.

"Ah, not gracing us with your company today?" Francis's voice came from his doorway - smooth, deep alpha tones that should comfort but the tinge of madness in them instead filled him with dread.

Hannibal looked to the door and stood, bowing. "You honour me with your company sire."

Francis huffed at the false flattery and stepped into the room, guards remaining at the door.

"The announcement will be made this evening."

"That I am to be your omega." Hannibal forced out the words.

"This upsets you or you believe it won't work?" Francis asked, clearly amused by the omega's response. He blustered on - "The Prince of the Woods they call him, a thief and outlaw. And try as I might, I have been unable to flush him out. But he will be compelled to rescue his betrothed, and therein lays the trap."

Hannibal was quiet for a moment before giving a passive shrug. "I just wonder if the Prince is so foolish as to fall for it." He baited. "Granted I have not seen him since he was a teen, but he was not a stupid boy."

Hannibal schooled his expression - this was a path he could surely lead the hot headed King down, if he was very careful. There had been something in Francis' reluctance to this course that had given Hannibal an idea of his character. He was more malleable than perhaps a king should be - acting on advice from his aides despite clearly not wanting to. An alternative might be easy to suggest, and god-willing, might be easily accepted.

"Is it not an obvious trap?" Hannibal finally asked, trying to emphasise the camaraderie in his tone - a collusion. A tone that told Francis that he was right not to want to listen to his advisors and their ridiculous plots.

All the same Francis' jaw tightened and fists balled at the impudence, so Hannibal continued quickly. "Why not instead challenge him? You have already tried to hunt him like game, but this fish is too smart for the lure you bait. It must have greater appeal. An appeal to his duty and honour. We knew little of each other in the past, I am not the ideal bait."

Francis began to pace to and from the window, his face curling into a snarl.

Hannibal did not let the fiery nature of this beast deter him. “Think instead on this Sire. Will is an honourable and noble man. As a person I may mean little to him, a practical stranger. But tradition and honour - pride - a call to this would be a better lure. Challenge his honour.”

Francis sneered. “And then what? I want to catch the man, have him kneel before me and put an end to the idea of his claim to my throne.”

“Quite understandable. If you challenge him this way I believe he will come before you and bend the knee with no hesitation.” Hannibal crooned the words, trying to charm as any omega might. “Play on this weakness in him. Do not claim me, but make public in your announcement that the Prince is yet to fulfill his claim instead. We were betrothed in a binding contract, you as King could decree that it still holds under your reign - it is his duty to return and marry me as was contracted. And then he is yours - a prisoner. A useful one... perhaps for more than kneeling?”

Francis seemed interested now, listening intently. “He shouldn’t kneel before me?”

Hannibal shrugged, and gave a dismissive shake of his head. “That is for you to say Sire. But once the contract of marriage and bonding is completed, the Prince will be bound to me and would not dare make a move against you if it would endanger his omega.” Hannibal looked thoughtful for a moment before adding, as though the idea had simply popped into his mind - “perhaps better than forcing him to acknowledge your legitimacy, you can instead remove his power? Kneeling before you could incite the people who do not believe him sincere. However, his remaining here as my consort, effectively neutered and a member of your court - well, that is legitimacy that will stick in the throats of those who had put their hope in him.”

Francis’ expression was a curious one, as though something warred within him in trying to decide whether to trust in Hannibal’s words or not. In the end he snarled at Hannibal, alpha tone almost threatening.

“I will consider it.”

As Francis started from the room, Hannibal took the chance, the risk, to add one final thought - “Give the people a fairytale, Sire - to reunite the lonely prince with his long lost love - who could resist?”

Francis huffed and stalked from the room. Hannibal looked after him, watching him go as he considered the interaction. When the evening came, Francis would either announce his marriage to Hannibal, or the enforcement of the Prince’s claim on him.

He could only wait in hope that the latter would be preferred. The fifteen year old he had known may well have been impeteous enough to give himself up for such a noble reunion. He hoped the adult Prince was just as much a fool to do so now.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

There is a wedding.

Word of the Royal announcement spread quickly. The proclamation had been made in the town square to those gathered there, but by midnight word had travelled to the ends of the city and beyond.

It would have been much longer before word of it reached the Prince's encampment and the Prince himself, but for the fact that he was still at the merchant's inn at the edge of the city when word reached the townsfolk there in the late evening.

"More flagons." Brian instructed the server, having to raise his voice over the excitable chatter that had been escalating by the minute. She nodded and went to move back to the bar before Brian stopped her with a hand on her arm - "what's going on?"

"There was a royal proclamation, whole city is buzzing with it." She told him before starting back.

Brian turned to the rest of the small group with a quirked brow.

"Interesting." Katz pondered before getting up from the table. Brian, Jimmy and Will watched her as she went to the bar, purchased a bowl of the broth they had ready there and began talking with a few others sat eating.

They sat in silence as they waited for Katz to finish the broth and return, picking up excited chatter here and there from everyone around them. There were some words none of them could miss - "Prince", "Count Hannibal", "Wedding", "Betrothal".

He was listening so intently to the words floating around that the server placing their flagons down on the table brought him back into sudden focus.

Every hair on Will's body stood on end as he waited for Katz. He looked over and watched her laughing and eating merrily with the assorted band at the bar - ingratiating herself as well as she always did. They found out so much information in these ways - passing as visiting merchants they were always welcomed. Despite the misfortunes the people had suffered since Francis had installed himself on the throne, the people were still kind and genuine when called upon.

They had always been an asset to his father, Will knew. The King had spoken highly of them all - praised the people that made the kingdom work, for without them they were nothing. From the likes of Robert keeping trade open to the East, to the lowliest field hand bringing in

the harvest. They were everything, and the pride of the King had been clear to them all in the low taxes and the masses of public works. Will's father had seen his position as a custodian for the people - there to manage the wealth of the Kingdom to the greatest benefit of all. And even now that Francis had raised taxes, routed inflated trade through his own Kingdom, and neglected public works, the people still had kindness in their hearts.

It seemed like an age before Bev stood and returned to them, dropping back into her seat and picking up her ale.

"Well?" Jimmy asked, despite having previously been the King's valet he was never the most patient of staff, though in this case he spoke for all of them.

She drained her flagon and wiped a sleeve across her mouth. "That broth was salty."

"Katz!" Will hissed.

"Okay, let me just… I'm trying to work out a way to explain this without you going off half-cocked." She frowned at Will and he raised his brows.

"I'm not some impetuous-" Will started but was cut off by Jimmy's snigger. "Just say it plainly Bev, what news?"

"Francis issued a Royal Proclamation, that all betrothals made under the reign of your father are still as legally binding under his." She picked up Will's flagon and began to drink from that, muttering into the ale - "Including your betrothal to Count Hannibal Lecter."

Jimmy coughed on his ale and Brian winced.

Bev placed down Will's, now empty, flagon.

"Apparently the news has been met with a mixed reaction. Some people are saying that it's Francis trying to legitimise his reign by making Will part of the nobility through marriage. Others think it's a trap and Will will be killed on sight. The vast majority think Francis is just trying to win over the masses with an extravagant public wedding."

"That's encouraging." Jimmy deadpanned.

"But apparently *everyone*," Bev continued, "is hopeful that no matter what happens, the Prince will somehow improve their lot. They have great faith in the Will of the Woods."

The group fell silent, not even Jimmy had a snide remark to make.

Will looked around the room, strangely encouraged by their faith in him - a man who had been little more than a boy when he had last been truly known to them. They judged him on his actions in the woods - the things that had made them all outlaws, as they stole from the King and gave to the needy.

If only he could really give them what they wanted. It struck him as cruel that this might be the one chance they had to make a play against Francis - try and turn whatever he was planning back on himself. But they still had no army, no great numbers of people and

weapons of the sort Francis had used to conquer them. Where Francis had had an army, his father had had merchants and farmers.

Will's thoughts were interrupted by a thud that made them all jump. They were amongst the very few in the room that had been startled and turned towards the source of the noise. At the end of the bar nearest to them stood a blacksmith, his leather apron burned in places and his hands coal-black from work. He was a large man, and Will recognised him immediately as the smithy that had done work for his father on occasion. Jack Crawford, Will recalled, and he had just slammed onto the bar the fiercest looking axe Will was sure he'd ever seen.

"Yes, yes Jack, that will do nicely!" Hobbs, the innkeeper, had come to the front of the bar to lift the axe and admire it. "My last wasn't worth the sharpening any more. This one looks like it will serve me nicely when I start to prepare for winter."

Jack inclined his head and wore a prideful grin - and rightly so, the craftsmanship was clear even from across the room.

"Abigail, be sure to mark this on a tab - Jack eats and drinks for free until the end of winter."

"You're too kind," Crawford interjected. "This axe is not worth so much."

"Hush now. Let's not haggle." The innkeeper replied with a smile. "I'll be the judge of worth here."

Crawford laughed and nodded and then began talking at a lower tone with the man. It was only the fact that he could no longer hear them that Will realised he had been listening so intently. He felt strangely warmed by the interaction. The people - his people - still willing to help each other, to barter in such a way and work together in these times when sustience was scarce. They would do anything to keep each other from starving, take what payments they could to help a neighbour. His father would have been proud to see them collaborating thusly. In the face of adversity, they found strength in their numbers.

"I have to go to the Palace." Will turned to Bev, fixing her with a determined glare before she had chance to object.

For the few days they had been there Will had attempted to get close to the palace, but it had been impenetrable. No way to even gain access to the woods he knew so well. As each day passed he grew all the more frustrated at being unable to glimpse his betrothed. But this was more than that. This perhaps was the opportunity they had been waiting for.

Bev shook her head. "This is a trap, Will. It's… I mean, it's clearly a trap."

Will rolled his eyes at her. "Of course it is, but I cannot refuse it. My honour has been questioned. I must return to court and wed Hannibal."

"Are you listening to yourself?" She hissed.

"It's a trap, yes. But it's also the best opportunity I will ever have to retake the Palace and my kingdom."

“Don’t you think you might need an army for that?” Bev quirked a brow.

Will grinned.

*

Hannibal woke when the heavy curtains in his room were drawn back and cast his bed in the bright light of morning.

He blinked and sat up, taking a moment to focus on the maid, a young omega woman with wild red hair.

“Sorry Sir, the King asked that you be woken early.”

“That’s quite alright-”

“Freddie Lounds.” She supplied with a slight curtsy. “I’ve… worked here since I was a child, sir, before King Francis. I started in the kitchens, but when I was old enough I became an undermaid. The palace is very busy today sir, so I offered to help with your preparations.”

Hannibal gave her a soft smile and studied her. She was certainly not all she seemed - the almost shy and demure exterior struck him as an act, though to what end he wasn’t sure. Perhaps that was just how she had survived the change of employer when Francis took the Palace, perhaps it was more.

“Thank you for your assistance, Miss Lounds.” Hannibal smiled congenially.

“Sir,” she gave a slight nod. “Always at your service.”

For the briefest moment there was a conspiratory smile across her lips, fleeting and then gone again as she tidied his vanity, and placed a fresh water jug there for him.

“Your valet will bring your breakfast and help you dress. Though first perhaps you’d like the chance to wash? Your betrothed arrived at dawn and I’m sure the King would like you to be at your best.”

There was a wicked grin as she turned and left, and Hannibal wasn’t sure whether to like her or not. And for now that wasn’t something he could dwell on - his mind already consumed with the news that Will was in the Palace.

*

It was lunchtime when Will finally saw Hannibal Lecter for the first time in six years.

At dawn Will had walked right up to the Palace gates and asked to be admitted to see his betrothed. The guards had seemed somewhat surprised but let him through. He had been left waiting in a sitting room until he was granted an audience with the King, brief as it was. Will had been marched into the throne room - so different to how it had been in his youth - the new decor was that of a conqueror not a King.

Francis had read the proclamation for Will's benefit and had him declare that he was there to mate his betrothed. When Will agreed, Francis had grinned and strode from the room.

Hours had passed since then, back in the sitting room once more, before his solitude was interrupted by a valet who took the peasant rags he had been wearing and dressed him in finery he had not seen for many years, nor did he miss it. It was hard to climb trees in such regalia - he had known that from a young age.

Once dressed and refreshed, the valet - a man from Francis' staff that he did not know - took him through to the dining hall. He was to dine with the King and the Count. His eyes drawn immediately to the omega - *his* omega - when he entered.

Hannibal was breathtaking.

The years had been kind to him and he looked more beautiful than Will remembered. The age difference between them did not seem so great now that they were both of age. Or at least it had not until Hannibal turned from the window he had been gazing out of and caught sight of Will.

He looked him over for a moment, a slight sneer on his lips that made Will feel like a child again.

"Come, Count, your love has arrived." Francis was already seated and swept his hands to indicate they both sit at the table, his amusement plain.

Will grit his teeth and took a seat next to Francis as Hannibal took the opposite, a look of disdain never leaving the omega's face.

"Is this not a pleasant reunion?" Francis grinned.

"Would you have it that I speak the truth or flattery?" Will asked Francis.

It was so strange, so surreal to be this close to the man who killed his father. Had there not been more at stake, he would have grabbed a knife from the table and gutted him where he sat.

Before Francis could reply, Hannibal let out a huff.

"He was never gracious nor polite as a child, your highness. Do not expect more of him now that he has lived as a wild man for six years."

It was not the barb that stung, but the cold look in Hannibal's eyes. Will had been petulant, but only towards Hannibal, and had they not repaired that next to the lake?

"My omega is beautiful but cruel. Your words wound sir, which I am sure the King takes a great pleasure in." Will found himself biting back with the impudence Katz often accused him of. For a moment there was a glimpse of a smile on Hannibal's face - fond not triumphant, but it was gone in the blink of an eye. So skilled this man was at hiding his emotions.

“And yet, you still wish to honour the betrothal your father made?” Francis’s words were tinged with a cruel delight.

“If I do not, it is a stain upon my character and a great dishonour to my most beloved father.” Will asserted, as the servers began to set food before them all. It was a strange sort of civility - or a mockery of it.

“You may have your omega, as your father wished. Moreover, he is a member of this court and so shall you be. You are no longer recognised as Prince of course, but I will grant you the title and reach of the Count’s Consort.” Francis grinned, unable to delight in the demotion he spoke of. “And after the wedding, you will both be bound for the East, where I wish the Count to continue his position as envoy.”

Will saw a flicker of something across Hannibal’s face - not quite a raised brow - but certainly he hadn’t been expecting those words. His features smoothed out once more and Will shook his head in defeat.

“A neat plan indeed.” Will said. “I will be out of your way, but not deposed, not dead. In fact, the people may even see it as my abandoning them. But what choice to do I have?”

“None.” Francis growled. “No choice, *your highness*.” He snarled the words. “It is either this, or I shall put to death you, your omega and all the staff remaining here that once served your father that I have thus far given my protection. Either way I will have the people understand that you are not some great hope.”

Will took a breath to avoid saying something he might regret, instead giving a curt nod.

“When we are finished with this meal I will have preparations begin, you will be wed tomorrow and dispatched to the East on the next high tide.” Francis stated calmly.

Will nodded again.

In truth he had not expected the pomp the townsfolk had, but perhaps he had expected a little longer to prepare. As it was, the high tide was a week away, he knew - that would be more than enough time.

He hoped.

*

“We are to be married then.” Hannibal spat the words as though they left a bad taste in his mouth. The King had retired immediately after dinner and seemed unconcerned with them, leaving them to do as they would as they finished with digestifs.

“So it would seem. I suppose you had begun to imagine you were free of me.” Will had meant to say it as a joke, but it came out barbed.

It was not an unfounded remark.

Throughout dinner Hannibal had been unkind and cruel with every word. More so than the aloof young man Will remembered and it had clearly entertained the King. Perhaps Hannibal had switched his loyalty?

As the staff cleared around them, Hannibal rose and went back to the window he had been looking out of when Will had arrived. After a few minutes silence, Will stood and joined him there, following his gaze to the view all windows on this side of the Palace held - the lake.

“It’s beautiful.” Will said quietly, almost to himself.

“Will you say the same of me tomorrow, I wonder?” Hannibal’s tone gave nothing away as they stood side by side, not sparing a glance for each other.

Will frowned and then smiled. “Hannibal, I may have been only a child, but even I knew beauty enough to know you were beautiful then and as an adult I cannot refute that.”

Hannibal turned to look at him then and the omega’s eyes sent a shiver through him. That day at the lake Hannibal had stirred something in him that, as a child, he could barely understand - but he understood it now. The heating of his blood and the desire pooling within him. A desire not just for Hannibal, but an alpha’s desire to claim and mate - as prickly and obstinate as he was.

He knew his own eyes must betray him and for a moment he thought the omega might lean in and kiss him - as absurd as that seemed. But he did not. Instead his lips tweaked up into a cruel grin.

“You still seem quite the child to me.” Hannibal mused before turning on his heel and stalking from the room.

*

It would have hurt Hannibal to be so cruel to Will, had he not known it to be for the best. And Will had, impressively, beared it well.

He knew enough of Francis in this short time in the Palace, to know that should they find a genuine affection for each other, the king would not be pleased. In some twisted way he saw this as a punishment. For them to *want* to truly be married would enrage the King and perhaps spoil any plans.

Whatever those plans might be.

He had been surprised that Will had given himself up so soon, thinking it might take some time for the Prince to put into action whatever plan he had made. For surely he had spent many years wondering how to get safely into the Palace in order to kill the King and finally take back his throne. Hannibal had been happy to afford him the opportunity, and was not without his own plan - should it be necessary.

At the very least, if they just continued as they were, they would be set to the East and could plan further from there. That had been an interesting development - one that Hannibal had

thought a great deal on but had been cautious enough not to mention to the King. He didn't want his whispers in the king's ear to become a yell, and so the Francis reaching this conclusion on his own had been gratifying.

Either way, he was putting a great deal of trust in a man he hadn't seen in many years, though he couldn't let Will know that. Not when they were in company - the King had his people everywhere and every room seemed always filled with staff.

The only chance to speak candidly would likely be their wedding night.

Such a strange thought.

Not at all as he had imagined all those years ago, before Francis had flown his dragon standard over the kingdom.

He had not imagined much in detail - simply that they would be married as arranged. That the King and his uncle would both be present and that it would perhaps be celebrated by the kingdom with a day of festivities. But it was a distant thought - more a memory of royal weddings past to gauge it by.

He had not thought of how the Prince might dress, how he might smile at him and delicately hold his hand. He had not thought of these things until Will stood next to him at the window overlooking the lake.

Hannibal pushed the thoughts down, it would not do to dwell on them. They had been betrothed as an arrangement between their families - a suitable match. In many ways an arrangement of convenience. And they were certainly no more of that now. Love or even attraction was no factor, though he was sure it was something hoped by their families.

This was not the case for King Francis, his hope for them was quite different indeed.

*

Will wasn't sure why he felt nervous.

He could only attribute this state to the strange circumstances. It had been quite some time since he had been apart from his rogue band, and that was as odd as being back in the Palace itself. Add to it that he had woken this morning in a bed not his own and was now preparing to wed his long lost betrothed omega.

And of course, that was a means to an end. No matter how well Hannibal looked, and how he wondered if it would be possible to soften the omega's hardness towards him, there was a purpose to this. The wedding would be today, then tomorrow and until the high tide, Will would find their contacts within the Palace and set his plan in motion.

But first, to be married.

He stilled his hands as the valet opened the door to the fine drawing room. It had been converted on this occasion to house himself, Hannibal and a few chosen witnesses - including of course the King - to make legal their contract. It was, Will was certain, not the grand

wedding his father might have hoped for him. But Will found he did not care, firstly as a means to an end. And secondly, when he looked up on Hannibal and rational thought deserted him for a short while.

The omega wore a pale suit, that was very fine before being put on, Will was sure. But it hugged Hannibal's figure excellently, right down to the precise cut and tie at the knee that made Hannibal's stockings look all the more wonderful. Will's heart raced at imagining he might run his hand over those stockings.

All told, it was an excellent complement to his own dark suit, and in some strange way Will was sure that - had they married with the pomp expected - it was all that he would have seen. Hannibal was all he would have taken in, even amongst the glittering garlands of the ceremony his father would have planned.

They stood before the minister in the quiet room and it was all Will could do to keep his blush in check as his cheeks flushed.

This was such a strange circumstance indeed.

*

The day had been by rote, perhaps for the best, Hannibal wondered.

First the ceremony, and then the nobility had been solemnly assembled at court for a banquet. It had been taciturn and awkward. Of those from before, they didn't know what to say, and those that had been installed by Francis, didn't care to say anything. And so they went the entire day without even congratulation.

Instead they sat side by side in the banquet hall and said nothing. Not even to each other.

It was quite the relief when they were allowed to take their leave - the Prince - now Count Consort - having been relocated to the rooms Hannibal had been installed in.

The valet let them in and Hannibal was relieved to find the room empty - no staff awaiting any instructions for them, or more likely waiting for information to give the King. It was with that relief that Hannibal sank against the closed door as Will continued into the room.

Will turned and frowned. "Are you quite well? Hannibal I…" Will looked away, "I assume nothing from you."

Hannibal's smile seemed to surprise the alpha.

"Chivalrous of you. Though I assure you I would not be at all scandalised, we are married after all." Hannibal grinned all the more as the alpha blushed. He huffed a laugh - "I have been waiting since the day by the lake to see if I could once more raise that blush. I was certain that it would suit you well."

"Your words are a little at odds with your conduct. You have been indifferent to me and I was concerned that this was something abhorrent to you. What was your plan Hannibal?"

“For today, selfishly, I had none beyond the desire to keep both of us alive if at all possible. This seemed a better prospect of that than you waging an unwinnable war if Francis wounded your pride by marrying me.”

“You think I am so prideful?”

“I think you are so honourable.”

Will huffed a laugh at that and Hannibal smiled fondly at him. Hannibal had imagined this sort of banter between them after their meeting at the lake. That the prince, once grown, would be a sharp wit who would be beautifully teased.

“Can I hope then that you don’t hate me quite as much as you seemed this last day? Nor as much as I hated you as a child?” Will grinned.

Hannibal laughed at that, before admitting - “I felt limited in what I might say where others might hear..”

Will frowned even as he continued to smile, clearly he had expected the evening to unfold differently.

“Will you trust me Will? There are things I would say.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The wedding night

Chapter Notes

FYI the chapter count has gone up to 5 as I wanted to keep the chapter lengths roughly the same and this seemed like a good place to stop. Final chapter coming soon!

"Will you trust me Will? There are things I would say."

"What would you say, Hannibal?" Will asked, almost nervous to receive the answer.

Given how serious he had seemed, Will was somewhat startled by Hannibal's amused chuckle.

"A great many things, but we only have time for the pertinent."

Will watched as Hannibal strode across the room to his vanity, moving the wash bowl slightly and pulling from under it a note, folded small. He walked back and handed it to Will without comment.

I will come at midnight on your wedding night. Be expectant of my company.

Will frowned and looked at Hannibal with puzzlement, it was a little before midnight now and it had been Hannibal who had excused them from the mock celebrations, claiming fatigue.

"Who gave this to you?" Will asked, trying to discern the meaning of the company they were to expect.

"Miss Lounds, she is-"

"Freddie." Will smiled at the name. She was one of their contacts within the palace and had been a favourite of Katz before the palace had been taken. She had snuck occasional messages out to them and they worried between every message that she had been uncovered in some way. Will breathed a sigh of relief - "I am glad to hear she is well."

Hannibal quirked a brow at him.

“Is this your plan?” He asked, curious.

Will frowned for a moment. “I… Not exactly, but it is now.”

Hannibal’s brow creased into its own frown before smoothing out as Hannibal chuckled. “Perhaps you are that same impetuous boy then?”

“Perhaps a little.” Will allowed with a small smile. The clock on the mantle struck the first bell of midnight. “I… had hoped to rally my people within these walls and am hoping that my fellow outlaws rouse those without. It… is a plan relying on a lot of hope. But there was no better opportunity.” He felt compelled to explain.

“Quite.” Hannibal agreed with a soft smile.

They both startled at a sudden rattle across the room, by the large, four-poster bed.

“What the-” Will was interrupted by a second rattle that gave way to a creaking as the clock struck it’s last. The creaking became more of a crack - the sound of new coats of varnish giving way as a small, secret door opened to the side of the bed.

“Your Highness.” Freddie, slightly dusty and cobwebbed, curtsied as she stepped into the room from the hidden passage.

“Freddie.” Will smiled and moved forward, reaching out a hand to clasp hers like old friends. She was a few years older than him but they had played a little as children, though he hadn’t been fond of her disposition until she was at least ten years.

“I am so glad to see you well.” She was beaming and looked a mixture of hopeful and grateful. “And Katz?” She asked hurriedly, bringing a smile to Will’s face.

“She is well. I hope we all remain so.” Will replied.

There was a moment of silence as those words hung in the air until Hannibal spoke up.

“Is this safe? I assume the king doesn’t suspect of your comings and goings?”

Will stifled a chuckle as Freddie quirked a brow at the omega.

“I had the impression of you that you were fastidious, not that you are wrong to be.” She smiled, then gave a slight shake of her head. “These secret passages have not been used since before the last king, only a few knew of them. We have kept them secret since Francis arrived and used them sparingly. I’m just waiting for-”

As if on cue, she was interrupted by slight creak and another figure appeared through the small open door.

“Chilton?” Will was surprised to see the older man, his father’s physician who they had assumed dead.

“Young Prince, not so young now.” Chilton had that poor attempt at charm about him as Will remembered, but he was no less glad to see him.

“You are well?” Will held out his hand to shake, though instead the doctor kissed the back and took a low bow, as he had done many times for Will’s father. Will remembered mocking him mercilessly to Katz for how snivelling he could be.

“I am. I… found good favour with the king. He is not a well man so I have been… I have made myself as invaluable as possible. I have his ear, somewhat, and suggested these rooms best befit the Count. Of course, at the time I had no idea if we would have reason to use the passages, but at the least I hoped we could smuggle his lordship out had there been a need.”

Chilton turned his unique brand of charm on Hannibal and Hannibal gave a nod in return.

“Very kind of you.” Hannibal acknowledged. “And what now? It seems a waste to smuggle one or both of us out.”

“Indeed.” Chilton agreed before turning back to Will. “We are all at your disposal your highness. Everyone is ready for your word on how to act.”

Will didn’t miss that everyone in the room now watched him expectantly. He cleared his throat. “I have… In the capital my people make efforts on my behalf, but I mean to take the Palace from within. Do you have enough people for that? I could use your advice on how best to get to Francis - bring him down whilst he is unawares to maximise the confusion and our success.”

Will grew in confidence as he relayed the plans, hoping only that there were enough people to secure the king’s men.

“I can do better.” Chilton grinned. “Of an evening the king often sleeps ill and has bad dreams. I give him a draught, a little mixture that helps him sleep more restfully. It would not take many drops more to make his slumber deep, possibly permanent. Had it not have resulted in the retaliation of his men, I would have done this many times over.”

“Here’s the plan then.” Will said, knowing his tone was eager, like the child he had been. “Tomorrow night you will administer to him doctor,” Chilton gave a curt nod. “And Freddie, please get word to the Port Inn, at the edge of the capital where it meets the docklands. My people are there, tell them they are needed at the palace at midnight.”

Freddie’s lips curled into a smile. “At dawn the milk will be delivered from the farm, Matt, the farmer brings it, he will take the word. I have trusted him this task many times in the past.”

Will was nodding in his eagerness. “Come fetch me when it is done Chilton, then we will go from there. Freddie, ensure all those loyal to me are able to secure the king's men.”

“I can have someone create a distraction. We had a small fire in the kitchen last year that caused a great commotion and drew most of the guard to put it out. It wouldn't take much to replicate it and bolt the doors behind them.”

Will nodded. “Do that once Chilton is with the king. Create chaos where you can but keep the path to the gates to the city cleared. When I have word I shall know how to act from there.”

Chilton bowed low and made to leave, starting towards the secret door as he mentioned how they increased the risk of discovery every moment they remained in this room.

Freddie followed behind him and stopped at the door, looking as though she had delicate news she reluctantly must share.

“Freddie?”

“I… I overheard below stairs that the king would have proof of your consummation. To ensure the marriage is legal and binding. The sheets will be inspected in the morning.” She made the statement before a quick curtsy and was gone, leaving Hannibal and Will in a strained silence.

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Will cleared his throat, causing Hannibal to look over at the nervous alpha.

After their guests had left they had said little, only begun a mundane routine of undressing and preparing for bed. When Hannibal looked down at his piled nightclothes he wondered if there was a point in putting them on. If they did not give evidence of their consummation then all plans could be in jeopardy if the king reacted poorly. Who knew what the man might do? Sometimes he seemed quite mad.

Will interrupted Hannibal’s thoughts -

“When I discovered we were betrothed, in the little time I had to consider it, I assumed I would have chance to court before we wed. As much as the conclusion would have remained the same, I’d have liked for us to know each other better and be more comfortable with each other.”

The words were firm but gentle, speaking of Will’s consideration - which Hannibal appreciated.

“I had made the same assumption when we were growing up. But, please, don’t make yourself uneasy on my account. Had Francis not taken the throne, this night would still have concluded the same.”

Will shook his head. “I don’t… I don’t want that.”

Hannibal felt his blood run a little cold. “I know we were not friends, but this appears to be a necessity.”

He was sure his reservations were much the same as Will’s, but his thoughts were practical. If the king needed evidence they must make it. It was a simple equation. Perhaps Will simply didn’t desire him in that way, which he could understand though… he looked over the alpha and could not find him unattractive. He had grown into a beautiful man, and the display of his strength of character since he had arrived at the Palace was equally as attractive.

But attraction was not relevant. They had to do this and Hannibal had no interest in forcing something that was not there between them, and may never be.

The concern writ large on Will's face brought to mind something else.

"Will." He breathed the name out on a soft breath. "If you would… prefer to think of someone else, I won't mind."

"What!" Will's reply was indignant and his cheeks immediately reddened. "I… I don't…"

Hannibal couldn't help the soft chuckle at the suddenly sheepish alpha before him.

"I… have never really… Have you?" Will's cheeks bloomed red.

Hannibal's eyes went wide for a moment at the true realisation of Will's lack of experience.

"I… have had assistance during my heats. Very perfunctory and necessary." Hannibal admitted, refusing to look away at the admission. It was something he need not be ashamed to own.

Will nodded, as though he had expected no less, before continuing - "It has been many years and this arrangement was void as far as we might both have been concerned. I would not be upset if there were someone else, if you'd taken another alpha to be your-"

"No." Hannibal found himself replying abruptly, strangely concerned that Will understand he had never gone back on the arrangement.

There were long minutes of silence that seemed to stretch between their rigid forms, now standing either side of their would-be marital bed.

Finally Will seemed to lose a war within himself and spoke softly, looking down as he did so. "I mean no offense Hannibal, so please don't take it. But I do not wish to… I can't. I… I don't know you, it is not in my nature to… I can't knot you."

"I understand, Will and I am grateful for your honesty." And he had to admit, a little stung. Perhaps he had grown fonder of Will in the last day than he had assumed?

Will breathed a sigh of relief and finally looked back at him. "How will we… we need to fool Francis, should he do as Freddie suggested he plans to."

Hannibal thought for a moment, the first words into his mind he took time to consider before saying them anyway. "If the king will have evidence there are other means. I… don't wish to make you uncomfortable."

*

Will tensed as Hannibal made another sound.

He had retired to the adjoining bathroom, but had not dared call for a servant to fill the bath - though muffling the sounds with water would have been a good idea. Instead he sat in the window there, looking out over the lake, as he heard his husband come undone by his own hand.

Will wasn't sure it was any better than them copulating. Either way there was a terrible sour feeling in his gut as Hannibal attempted to produce enough slick that the sheets would tell a false story well enough.

Another low moan was followed by sharp breaths and Will's imagination placed him into the room - an image before him of his husband running a hand between his legs and pushing fingers into-

Will let out a keening whine at the thought, quite unconsciously, but it was clearly loud enough for Hannibal to hear as the omega went silent.

For a moment there was no sound other than Will's shuddering breath. He had become so painfully hard that he wondered at relieving himself, though to do so in the bathroom and have any evidence of it left there could be their downfall.

Will closed his eyes tight shut and clenched his jaw, willing his arousal to leave him. But before it could, Hannibal began again, low purrs of pleasures becoming quicker and faster. Soft, wet sounds made Will's mouth water, not to mention the hedy scent that came in waves even through the closed door.

Will put a hand on his on crotch, wincing at the renewed ache that caused.

Hannibal climaxed. The moans changed pitch. He could practically feel the omega's body shudder even through the door.

And then, on a ecstatic breath, Hannibal exhaled -

"Alpha."

Will trembled and was on his feet before he had thought further. He was at the door in two short steps but then hesitated.

Part of him, that driven by his baser instincts, wanted to slam open the door and ravage his omega. *His* omega! But the larger part of him was just as hesitant as he had been.

Hannibal was almost a stranger. And whilst he had imagined them getting to know each other and perhaps even liking each other a great deal - he certainly couldn't deny that he saw the potential for that even in a day. He could not bring himself to copulate with the man, husband or not. It felt dishonourable, and that was something Will could never be.

It was with this in mind that he rapped gently on the bathroom door, not entering the room until he heard a low murmur of "come in," from Hannibal.

The omega lay on his back, still panting a little. The sheets had been pulled back and he was nestled against the pillows. Though Will was not close enough to see the visual evidence, he

could not ignore the enticing scent of his husband's slick.

Hannibal's lips were parted, his hair slightly mussed and his fingers glistening.

Will took all of this in before realising the omega was completely naked.

"I… I didn't mean to intrude…" Will babbled, not even sure what his intentions had been, other than to instinctively go to the mate who had called out for him. "You… uh, you called. Did you… need something?"

He felt like an idiot and his cheeks burned red with the embarrassment. That at least brought a smile to Hannibal's lips - that same fond glance he had received a couple of times in the last day.

"My apologies, I… cried out on instinct."

Will nodded and went to turn away, unsure what else he should do when Hannibal spoke again,

"Will." Hannibal's tone was almost pleading. Will looked back to see he had reached out a hand. "Will you lay with me at least?"

Will swallowed and nodded, unsure how to refuse such a request. He made his way slowly to the bed, gently climbing in next to Hannibal but careful to leave a distance between them.

Hannibal licked his lips but did not look at Will as he spoke, which seemed to be for Will's comfort more than his own. "I am… not aroused enough to produce the amounts that Francis will no doubt expect.

"Hannibal, I can't…" Will started to interject but the omega rolled towards him then, laying on his side and studying Will intently.

"I know, and I'm not asking you to do more than you are comfortable, but… some small help would be appreciated. Stop any time you feel you must." It was almost a plea.

He had seen how Hannibal was with Francis, with himself in front of Francis - he could be false and manipulative. But this wasn't that. He could see clearly through the many defenses it dawned on him that Hannibal had. He could see the desperation for anything Will would give him to sate the arousal he had brought himself to.

Will nodded. "What would you have me do?"

He heard Hannibal swallow and scented a fresh wave of slick from the omega in response.

"Kiss me." Hannibal replied, breathlessly.

His heart thundering in his chest, Will leaned over and gently pressed his lips to Hannibal's. The omega tasted a perfect mixture of salty and sweet, enticing Will to deepen the kiss so that he could taste his tongue.

When Hannibal moaned into his mouth, Will moved over - pushing Hannibal back onto his back and half pinning him there.

They didn't break the kiss - alternating between rough exploration and languid licks - as Hannibal began to touch himself again.

Will placed his hand lightly on Hannibal's chest, his fingers flexing there, betraying his desire to touch his husband. He stroked down to his belly but didn't dare go further, until his perceptive omega took his hand and journeyed it further south.

Will's pulse raced as Hannibal guided his hand. He was sure he could pull away should he want to, but he didn't. Instead he allowed Hannibal to ghost his hand over the omega's steadily throbbing cock and down to the slick entrance behind it.

Will moaned and kissed Hannibal all the more roughly as he slipped two fingers into the omega. Hannibal's hand left his then as he clutched both to Will's shoulders, holding him firmly, like a tether.

He felt the slick growing, his fingers making a wet sound as he pumped them in an out.

Hannibal writhed against him, his hips jerking every so often in an involuntary attempt to take Will's fingers deeper.

For his part, Will was hard and leaking against the inside of his underclothes. He ignored the instinct to mount his husband, feeling his knott pulsing with his heartbeat. Instead he continued to pleasure Hannibal with his hand, allowing the omega's hips to grind up into him until he broke the kiss and cried out once more.

A thick gush of slick coated Will's fingers, and as he pulled them out it leaked steadily onto the sheets.

His heart was still hammering as he brought his fingers to his mouth and tasted the little slick he would claim. The flavour was wondrous and he whimpered at it. He damn near whimpered again when he looked down at Hannibal.

The omega was blissed out, his eyes closed and a gentle smile on his face. He was breathing shallowly and Will wondered if he might have actually fallen asleep. It was late, it had been a long day.

Will was considering doing the same when a hand fell upon his lightly clothed member.

Without opening his eyes, Hannibal began to rub him, before trying one handed to under Will's fastenings and release him.

"Hannibal, you don't have…" Will barely got the words out, finally swallowed into a groan when Hannibal's fingers wrapped around his freed length.

"I would like to show you the pleasure you showed me, and surely it only builds our evidence." Hannibal said, his words slightly slurred by tiredness and drunk on pleasure,

though he now looked at Will. “I will likely need to climax at least once more for it to be truly evident.

His slow strokes made Will tremble and he found himself just nodding in agreement.

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Hannibal woke with Will's head partly on his chest, face upturned to angle the alpha’s nose toward the scent glands on his neck. He was stroking a hand lazily along Hannibal’s side.

Hannibal couldn’t think of a more pleasant way to wake. He hummed his approval at Will’s actions, but the Prince drew back in response.

He opened his eyes to see Will gazing down at him, looking a little as though he had been caught out. The alpha settled against him once more, noticeably avoiding his eyes as he spoke -

“Hannibal, this is… I had hoped this for us. I like having this gentle tenderness with you. I hope we can have more in future, when we’re both ready.”

There almost seemed a question in his words, as though Will was cautious of what was between them.

It was a strange caution to have considering Will had brought him to climax three times the night before, once - the final time before they collapsed into sleep - he had curled his fingers in place of a knot.

“You are concerned that it is false, or that I am not receptive?” Hannibal asked. He thought on it for another moment before adding. “Or that I am unhappy having to wait for you to be comfortable?”

He felt Will shrug against him. “I don’t want to leave you in any doubt of my affections. I married you for my honour, but last night… that was affection not honour. I feel we could love each other, given time.”

Hannibal’s lips quirked into a smile and he nodded. “I share the same feelings and wishes. Let me assure you Will, that we are of one mind on this.” Hannibal admitted, so tempted to kiss the alpha again. His attraction to every aspect of his husband grew with each breath he took.

Before he could say anything further he felt Will sigh against him, clearly relieved.

They fell into a silence that allowed Hannibal to be lulled close to sleep once again before Will’s voice brought him to.

“Hannibal… You saved me. After we talked at the lake, I ran into the woods and that was where I was when the attack happened. It was the reason I was able to escape. But… moreover, our conversation it… it made me reflect and, well, it made me grow up a little. Enough that when the attack happened I wasn’t childish enough to bluster in and get myself killed - as much as I wanted to rush back inside. Instead Katz and I assembled as many of the

staff as we could find, and made off. Before our talk I would have thought it cowardice. There was something in what our conversation let me see of you, that instructed me in how to act, how to conduct myself as the heir to the throne. I knew then how good you could be for me, how much better you would make me as a man and a king."

Will looked up nervously as his words dried up, and Hannibal wondered that he was not used to speaking on such deep feelings.

"Thank you, Hannibal." Will continued quietly.

Hannibal shook his head to dismiss the thanks, taking in their stead, a sweet and deep kiss.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> They can already feel the first stirrings of love as they conspire to oust the despot King Francis...

The bliss of the morning had not lasted long.

After gentle kisses gave way to soft touches, Will began to wonder if maybe he could truly make love to the omega. He desperately wanted to, and it was getting harder to know whether that was instinct alone or more. He couldn't deny his attraction - his husband had always been beautiful, but where once he had been a gangly youth, he had grown lithe. He was firm and soft in all the perfect places and Will wanted to run his hands over every inch of him.

But more than physically, largely Hannibal was how he had assumed he would grow to be. Intelligent, charming, but also cunning and manipulative. Clear from the clever turn of words that had had young Will blushing at the lake's edge. Will had never bought into the stereotype of the manipulative omega, and any person he had encountered - regardless of dynamic - who had attempted manipulation, were not like this. Where others used manipulation like a blunt tool - clumsy and obvious - Hannibal wielded it like a scalpel, with the precision of a surgeon.

And it was not an off-putting thought. The way Hannibal had treated him in front of Francis had saddened him initially, but once he understood the reasoning it became clear and he held no malice. What he did hold was awe, and that quickly blossomed into another level of affection. Will had made a skill of cunning in order to survive all these years and to keep those around him alive - he knew how to work the advantage. He knew that Hannibal was his equal, if not better in many respects - his education, his intelligence and breeding. He was his certainly a match in wits and mirth, as Will had known from that day at the lake. But now he knew Hannibal to be, at the least, his equal in cunning and that made his chest swell and cheeks flush with affection.

He was not as childish to think of this as love, but it was certainly an infatuation that had been made all the more powerful by their night together. The things they did, Will had done before, infrequently over the years. He had never gone further and never been serious about the handful of would-be-lovers he'd had. Because... in his mind he was already married to Hannibal, even then. And had been since his father's revelation, as hard as he had taken it in that moment. It had settled in his mind that the omega was his, and there had been an ache in his chest for every day they had been apart. It lived alongside the ache of loss for his family, his friends and his father's kingdom - and now he might finally regain some of that.

Will wished he could have stayed with Hannibal that morning. Lay over him, kiss him softly, tell him how much he wanted to know him better in every way and start a life together. But the reality of the situation had abruptly presented itself when Freddie was sent in to fetch them to breakfast at the King's instance.

Will took the chance to observe the view from Hannibal's chambers, as they made ready. A perfect view afforded over the lake and the woods. He so missed those woods - the innocence they held. In truth, it was the innocence he missed - playing there with no fear, a wood only in name as it was safely circled by the palace walls. His own wood, his home of many years now, was different. It thrummed with life and a raw, wild energy. It was part of Will and Will was part of it. Being back here made him miss it in a way he never had missed the palace. He thought about taking Hannibal there with him, and a light shiver went over his skin - a thrill of anticipation and a realisation. He wasn't the king he was intended to be. He would depose Francis and free the kingdom, but he was no longer a prince. He was an outlaw, a wild and wily alpha, reverted to an instinctive way of life.

He shook the thought away for now. Distractions were not needed today. That could wait until Francis was gone and the throne righted.

As they had dressed with the help of their valets, a maid had come and removed the sheets as Freddie had suggested they might. But Will didn't know if their ruse had been taken entirely until they sat at the table together, across from each other with Francis at the head as they had the evening before the wedding.

Francis grinned, a cruel and vicious twist of his lips as he addressed Hannibal.

"Shame you aren't in heat." He chuckled.

Hannibal quirked a brow at the vulgarity of the suggestion. The implication that had he been, then their evening's activities would have resulted in a pregnancy. Not exactly a conversation for the breakfast table.

Will bit his tongue, wanting to criticise such uncouth talk, but knowing they had to stay the course. There was something about the man's lewd tone and even a touch of something musky in his scent that made Will wonder if he was due a rut. Either way, he was unsure how to reply, but found there was no need when Hannibal responded directly -

"Your felicitations, as I am sure that was no doubt meant, are noted. Though it can be difficult to conceive when taken in such a way."

Hannibal cast his eyes down, despite his firm tone. There was even a little quiver in his voice toward the end and Will's heart stopped for a moment. Anger blooming within him all the more when he watched Francis's grin grow at the thought of what Hannibal was saying - that Will had taken him against his will, incapable of controlling his baser alphan desires.

"I'm sure you'll learn to enjoy each other's company." Francis chuckled darkly. "Perhaps you should be less willful an omega, Hannibal. The once heir to the kingdom was no doubt expecting a docile and gracious mate."

"Yes your highness," was Hannibal's stuttered response, as he continued to look down at his plate. A broken omega, it would seem.

Will's anger at Francis broke into something else. A deep awe and affection for his husband. And no little amusement at the act, so entirely and disturbingly convincing.

Will cleared his throat, knowing he needed to play the role of alpha here, "Quite. Hannibal would do well learn an omega's place. I'm sure you agree your highness, that it is important for the nobility to conduct themselves in a traditional manner?"

Francis grinned and cocked his head at Will. "I'm surprised, perhaps you are not as much your father's son as I had thought. He was… progressive." Francis spat the word as though it was offensive in his mouth.

Will shrugged. "I am as you see, the product of my circumstances. I have his honour and his blood, but I have had to define myself by your hand and actions. Living as I have it has been very clear to me how much better society is served if an omega knows their place." He made of point of speaking matter of factly, dispassionate.

Whilst Francis let out a dark chuckle, Hannibal caught his eye - a quick flash there of encouragement and amusement. Oh yes, they were a pair well matched.

The rest of the meal was taken with Francis waxing on about his reign - what wonderful accomplishments had been made and how this kingdom was now almost equal to the one he now ruled in absentia from the throne here.

When it was finished they were pulled into a variety of meetings with different lords and clerks. Legitimising Will as the Count Consort so that there was no confusion that he had not returned as Prince. Arrangements were made for their planned departure, even a clothier called to measure Will for clothing that would better suit the different climate in the East. Everything proper was done, as best as Francis could do so - to make this disposal of the real heir to his throne above the reproach of either nobility or commoner.

Will had no doubt that he was congratulating himself thoroughly, unaware that with every hour that passed he was drawing closer to the end of his reign.

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An early dinner was taken, in the company of many nobles, where Francis made mention more than once that his intention with the early meal time was to give the newlyweds the evening to know each other. He insisted they would retire immediately after dinner so that Will might have chance to instruct his husband on the behaviour expected of an omega at court.

Hannibal was somewhat amused by the crassness and how it scandalised many of the other nobles present. And of course he played his role perfectly - entertained and enamoured by how well Will played his in turn. By the time they were released to go, the room - their audience - was left in no doubt that Will was determined to break his terrified omega before they left for the East.

In truth Hannibal found himself harbouring a wish for Will to take him as was expected - to finally mate with him. Though he would not push Will into it and he was sure the alpha's resolve had not changed in that respect.

Even so, he was receptive when Will pulled him into an immediate and passionate kiss the moment the door to the chambers closed.

After a moment the prince broke long enough to mutter against his lips - “don’t ever change.” - before he buried his face against Hannibal’s throat, taking in his scent.

Hannibal’s heart thundered in his chest and he trembled when Will’s arms encircled him.

“Will,” the name came out as a sigh. “You were magnificent.” He nuzzled into Will’s neck in return.

Will chuckled, his hot breath puffed against Hannibal’s neck, making the omega shiver.

“We make a good team.”

Hannibal returned the laughter. “Yes, we do indeed.”

He felt Will take a steadying breath before he pulled back, holding Hannibal from him.

“But,” Will let out a heavy sigh, “we have to remain focused.”

Hannibal chuckled again and gazed at him fondly. “I have every intention of remaining focused, but I will admit to allowing myself to enjoy my husband at the same time.”

Will blushed, his face heating at Hannibal’s clear desire for him. Perhaps their families had well known what they were doing when they made this match. Will was enough like his father and Hannibal enough like his uncle for their parents to at least hope for a good match, considering the strong friendship they had shared.

“Time could be our enemy today. We have much to do.” Will clearly forced the words, his eyes roaming over every part of Hannibal and taking him in. His desire was evident and Hannibal had to stifle a whine at the thought of not indulging it.

Instead he gave a curt nod, “Of course, your highness.”

He watched Will shiver and blush at his words and allowed a smug grin that made Will blush all the more.

*

Time passed too quickly. It seemed only a moment ago that they had arrived in the room to prepare themselves - changing into more appropriate, practical clothing - but evening was drawing on. Will buzzed with a nervous anticipation.

It had never been his design to kill anyone, but he had always done whatever he’d had to do. And now that meant finally retaking his throne. There was no beating Francis other than

death - there could be no quarter given if they wanted to avoid future conflict. It would hopefully give Francis' own kingdom pause before contemplating any retaliation. But they would deal that when the time came to pass.

It took Will a moment to realise he didn't need the internal justification. He knew it was the absolute truth. Francis must die.

When Frederick arrived he was sweating and panting. At first Will was worried the man had been followed, even through the secret passages. After a moment it became clear that it was merely adrenaline and fear.

"My lords," Frederick addressed them poorly before dropping into the chair by the vanity, catching his breath for a moment. Will remembered the man was prone to histrionics, but this was clearly something genuinely physical for him as his body trembled. "It is done. I… There was no way to administer enough of the draught to kill him, he was suspicious. I was able to give him twice his normal dose, explaining that I had changed the formula slightly and it was more watered down." Chilton shrugged, "He believed it well enough to drink the whole thing in one. Only the most determined commotion will break through the haze of it - he could be out for days..."

Frederick stopped abruptly, realising the error in his words - Francis would not live long enough to see how long the draught might have lasted. Once the palace was secured, he would be put to death.

"You did very well, Frederick." Will rumbled the words low, using the sort of commanding alpha tone he reserved for his people in the woods. He placed a hand on Chilton's shoulder and squeezed. The man gave a weak smile.

"We doctors… generally don't aim for the death of our patients." He forced out a chuckle.

Before they could say anything more, they could hear faintly the clock tower in the town chiming a half past eleven, before it was obscured by the sound of screaming.

*

Will had seen fit to leave Chilton in their chambers, with instruction to smuggle himself out as soon as he was able to do so. He was no further use to them so his safety needed to be his own priority.

Will was sure that Freddie had seen to her own safety as well, hoping that she was no longer near the kitchens.

It was clear, as planned, that that was where the commotion was originating. The further they descended into the palace, the more havok they met.

The servants were calmly and with great strength of will, leaving their posts and moving to safety - out of the castle and towards the lake as Freddie had no doubt instructed them to do so. By contrast, Francis' people were running about in mayhem. Despite their years here they did not know well the labyrinthian lower passages of the palace. Those that had escaped

being locked in the burning kitchen were scrambling to find a way out in their panic. It was clear from the locking of the heavy doors to the kitchens and the way the servants moved themselves quietly away, that this was not an innocent kitchen accident as it had been before. And that spread a panic through the palace.

A perfect cover for Hannibal and Will to move as they needed. They weaved through silent servants and hysterical guards down towards the servant entrances that faced the lake.

“Freddie!” Will saw a flash of red in the passage ahead, getting closer to find that she stood at the end of the passageway directing servants as to which exit to take.

“Your highness. The fire… It is raging out of control. The oil has caught and the kitchens are completely lost, along with the east passage.” There was no hint of panic as she relayed this, steadfast as she was.

Will nodded, “Make sure all our people get out.” That commanding tone again and at that she almost instinctively curtsied her response.

“I will, my King.”

Her words jarred Will for a moment.

Yes, he was retaking the throne, his kingdom, his people.

It was overwhelming but necessary.

Will turned and started down the passage, Hannibal following him out of the palace and towards the lake until they took a sharp turn.

“Now we see if Matthew was able to carry out his task.” Will muttered. He could feel Hannibal close behind him and the heat of the man was some reassurance.

As overwhelming as some of this was, he need not do it alone.

“The woods?” Hannibal asked as they made for the treeline.

“The groundskeepers gate.” Will clarified.

*

Hannibal was in awe of how Will moved through the trees.

The slight awkwardness in the palace, that Hannibal had assumed to be due to the starched clothing, was gone. Will clearly was still the wild sprite he had been as a youth - and likely to his benefit. Hannibal had to wonder if the Prince would have survived as he had, if not for the skills he'd learned in these woods as a child.

“Why this way, Will?” Hannibal asked. He had every faith in the alpha, but he felt compelled to ask, to hear it explained. He was already impressed with his husband’s display of confidence and competency, and wanted nothing more than to bask in it further.

“Freddie sent word to my people. You will remember Katz, my aide - she will understand to come here. Rather than a suicidal storming of the main gates, the woods hide this area from any view in the palace, so she would know to come instead to the groundskeeper's gate. It is much smaller, used for deliveries, but large enough for our needs.”

Hannibal’s mouth was pulled into a smirk as he continued to follow the alpha, his heart swelling when Will threw a confident grin over his shoulder.

Yes, this was how the wild alpha - The Prince of the Woods - was meant to be.

Before Hannibal could put any sort of voice to the desire this pulled in him, Will stopped in his tracks. Hannibal followed suit, though it took a moment for him to understand what had halted the his husband.

The murmurings of voices were low but getting clearer each passing moment.

Will moved again, the thicket making whisping sounds as he pushed through. Hannibal followed in his wake until they opened into a clearing - a path Hannibal realised. One that they might have taken the whole time from the palace, but the woods hid them better. There was a small gatekeeper cottage built into the palace outer wall, with the gate on one side of it.

A gate currently withholding what appeared to be the entirety of the town.

“Katz, what news?” Will greeted his friend warmly where she stood the otherside of the gate.

“All the very best, my prince.” She grinned and flourished a hand towards the lock. Will returned her grin - a bright and joyous thing at seeing his friends well - as he moved to the cottage.

Clearly he remembered the area well, and perhaps it had been largely untouched in his absence, for Will went quickly into the disused cottage and returned with a large key, perfectly fit to the gate lock.

When they opened the gates, Will was greeted warmly by his people, the townsfolk all pledging themselves to his service.

“Fredericka?” Katz asked as the crowd began to rumble forward with them at the head, taking the path now rather than the woods. They walked a pace, with Will and his party at the head of the townsfolk.

“She was well when we saw her less than a half hour ago,” Will clasped his friend’s shoulder and Hannibal felt as though he saw yet another side to the alpha he had yet been denied a chance to truly know.

He had grown into a fine, strong and caring man of great honour.

Hannibal’s thoughts were interrupted by a shout from one of Will’s band - Zeller.

“Will, the turrets.”

They looked up and saw the bowman moments before arrows began to fall like rain.

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“Katz, take Zeller through the woods to the east wing, you can come at them from there.” She was already nodding before Will finished speaking, knowing that she understood to use the backstairs that lead directly up to the turrets and rooftop. “Hannibal and I will take the west. Price, keep everyone back from the bowman’s range and as soon as the arrows stop, storm the palace. We’ve lost the element of surprise, but more than half the guards are trapped in the kitchens, we can still win this day.”

Everyone nodded their agreement and gave a raucous cheer as the four of them set back through the woods. When they diverged, Hannibal grabbed Will’s arm and stopped him, a look of concern on the omega’s face.

“Will, this has delayed us. At this rate there will be no time to extinguish the fire before it takes the kitchens… and then we will be unable to stop it from taking the palace.”

Will frowned at Hannibal, realising from the gentle touch to Will’s arm, that his concern was for Will’s emotional wellbeing - how he might feel about losing the home of his family for generations, not his own concerns over the loss of a building itself.

Will huffed a laugh and shook his head. “It’s just brick and mortar, Hannibal. It can be rebuilt, my people can’t be.”

Will turned and took off again, making haste towards the west wing and knowing Hannibal kept an admirable pace with him.

Katz and Zeller would make it to the top first, the east being closer. And sure enough, before they had climbed the last of the western back stairwell, commotion could be heard above them. Close quarters fighting, the swish of arrows lessening, the odd cry as it was clear each time a bowman went over the turrets.

They were almost to the top when a terrible roar sounded through the wing. It reverberated up the stairs from one or two flights below and they both knew immediately what it was.

“Francis.”

The scent of the alpha was almost sulphuric. A mix of adrenaline and the draught Chilton had given him. And something more...

“Frederick betrayed us?” Hannibal asked, clearly he didn’t get that sense of the doctor, and Will shook his head to confirm.

“No, he wouldn’t do that. If anything he’s always looking out for his own skin, if memory serves. And he knows Francis isn’t going to win this.” Will mulled over the words even as he said them. There was no benefit to Chilton in lying, something else was afoot.

And then he scented it proper.

“Will-” Hannibal’s eyes were wide as he scented at the same moment, Francis drawing closer to them and his scent proceeding him.

“Keep going up,” Will instructed with a growl, pulling Hannibal in front of him and practically pushing him ahead up the stairwell.

Francis was a monster at the best of times, Will dreaded to see what the alpha was like in rut, and he certainly wasn’t going to let the king near any omega - least of all his husband.

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Hannibal’s heart was still.

Any other man might find it thundering in his chest, but he knew himself to be almost singular in his calm.

Almost, because he could feel the same from Will now - the alpha was completely composed. He knew he would be able to hear Will’s pulse if it raged, and despite his flustering and blushing when they were alone, in this he was cool and undisturbed.

Yes, this was his alpha. The thought made his chest swell as his feet took him higher.

The air was chilled as they broke out to the top of the turrets, Katz and Zeller, along with several of the staff, were dispatching the bowman with haste. Hannibal found one in his path and had no qualms about pushing the man over the precipice as he failed to recover from the surprise of them bursting through the door.

Hannibal turned as Will slammed the door shut behind them, unable to find any way to bolt it.

Looking around, thanks to the help of the servants, Katz and Zeller had already cleared the roof and that was for the best.

“Katz, get everyone to safety. Go back down, let our people in, take the palace. Stay away from the kitchens, keep moving away from them and clear the palace as you go until the front gates are open and you are all back in the city.”

Katz frowned at him, cocking her head and no doubt wondering why the rushed order and what exactly he was doing leaning his entire weight against the door to the west staircase.

“Will-” she began to protest but then the scent must have hit her a moment before the door shook with weight slammed against it. Francis let out a roar of frustration at the door being barred, even though his force had almost toppled Will off of his feet.

Katz and several others made a move towards him, clearly intending to help, but the prince raised his hand to them as he braced against the door once more.

“Go, there are more important things to worry about.” Will clenched his jaw, a low growl in his next words as he gave his compatriots a dark look, “I will deal with the King.” He spat the word and his upper lip twitched into a snarl.

With a curt nod from Katz she started towards the east staircase, everyone else following.

“You too, Hannibal.” Will ordered, an alphan tone that many omegas would be swayed by.

And even though the door shook again, almost knocking Will over, he was steadfast.

“I would not leave my husband to fight alone.” Hannibal knew his tone brook no argument and certainly Will seemed equal amounts annoyed and enamoured. Of course he would wish for a mate who would be his equal in all ways.

“I can’t hold this much longer.” Will advised as the door was pounded twice more in quick succession.

Will’s blade was already in his hand and though he had one of his own, Hannibal spied a small battleaxe amongst the remnants of Katz’s battle for the tower. He picked it up and enjoyed the weight of it in his hand.

Hannibal had little time to draw a deep breath when the door shook again and Will was almost thrown clear. He managed to keep it shut, slamming himself back against it. But as soon as Francis ceased his efforts, Will moved. He grabbed Hannibal’s wrist and moved them to the side of the door.

And this time when Francis threw himself at the door, expecting it to be held back, it swung violently open and the alpha spilled through. He almost kept his footing but Will was on him, sliding passed him on his knees and attempting to land a blow with his dagger. Francis, with almost preternatural speed, moved from harm’s way before plunging his own dagger into Will’s face.

Hannibal felt his body spasm in response. Instincts telling him to flee and attack all at once.

Will roared and reared up, clutching hold of the knife and pulling it from his cheek before sinking it into the thigh of the king and then shouldering him across the roof, until he hit into a parapet and sank to the ground for only a moment. He was already recovering his feet as no other alpha would unless they too were in rut.

Francis was pure instinct now, as he grappled with Will.

Hannibal had rarely seen this, he was sure few people had. Alphan ruts were uncommon as most unmated alphas lost their sexual urges, and those mated synced with their omega’s heats. The result would be a mild and complementary rut. But where an alpha regularly indulged carnally without taking a mate, there was a risk of trauma bringing on a severe rut that needed sating through mating or killing or both. It was rare because this still could only come about through the alpha perceiving their life to be in danger and instinctively reacting to that. Instinctively needing to spread his seed before potential expiration.

Perhaps it had been the smell of the fire, the commotion of the attack - or more likely, Francis’s body realising he had been to all intents and purposes, poisoned. Either way, it had not only roused him from his slumber, but driven him to this dangerous extreme.

Perhaps more incompetence than betrayal, Chilton had clearly not factored for this eventuality.

And in truth, had it been someone else they might have sought to placate them, find a way to sedate them until an expert physician could be called. For this man? He deserved no such consideration.

Will's bloody cheek enough to justify now any sort of action, Hannibal launched himself at Francis. The alpha shrugged him off as though he were nothing, sending him flying across the rooftop before turning and advancing on him now.

The look in his eyes was burning fire and Hannibal was unsure whether it would mean his death or something altogether worse if the alpha bested them.

Movement caught Hannibal's eye and a moment later the king roared and threw himself back, as though trying to throw off the dagger that Will had plunged into his back. Hannibal took up his battle axe and regained his own feet.

As the alpha rounded on Will once more, Hannibal plunged his axe into Francis' calf, bringing a blood curdling scream as the alpha struggled to stay on his feet.

For a moment everything was still, as though time had frozen and it was only he and Will as their eyes met in the growing dark of the night.

An unspoken agreement. An unspoken knowledge of what the other was capable of in their deepest nature should they be driven to it.

Will sprung, Hannibal launching himself onto the king's back as Will's dagger finally found its home in Francis' gut. Will drew it across, driving the blade deep - enough to spill the alpha's intestines.

It was the desire to survive and thrive - the deepest instinct of any alpha or omega - that drove Hannibal to sink his teeth into the throat of the soon to be deposed King.

There were other ways he might have killed the man, but none would be as satisfying, and perhaps none would have drawn the same look of utter longing from his husband as he did when he ripped away the alpha's throat.

He and Will both stepped back as the king fell to his knees between them, life rapidly draining from him as they panted and gazed at each other.

Hannibal barely heard the wet thud of the alpha's body as he collapsed, his blood thudding in his ears. And not from the fight, no he had remained calm and precise as, he noted, had Will. But now they both stood at the edge of the roof, a whole kingdom before them that had a fate to be decided in this night. And all they could do was exhale shuddering breaths and gaze with a mutual desire for each other.

Will stumbled to him, the sounds from the palace below slowly creeping back in as they clutched hold of each other.

They could see Francis' people making haste towards the main gates, being cut down before they made it even half way. And if they had, no better fate would have awaited them, as what seemed to be the rest of the town waited there for the gates to open so that they might take their own revenge.

The day was theirs.

And despite this, in that moment it seemed so insignificant as they clung to each other.

Hannibal was unsure who moved first, but soon all he could taste was blood - whether his own, Will's or Francis' he didn't know. As Will's mouth moved against his own and their bodies pressed firmly to each other. His only thoughts were of how beautiful it was.

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Three Months Later

It was perhaps not the wedding either of them had envisaged in their youths, but a far cry from the perfunctory one Francis had ordered.

Of course, technically - and legally - they were already married, but the Assembly had insisted upon it. Nothing too lavish, and paid for by the spoils of Francis' deposition than any kingdom coffers. They had wanted a celebration that might bring the people together in rejoicing that wasn't so crass as to be a celebration of the death of the usurping King.

It had been a ceremonial blessing by the lake and then celebrations for the whole town - the whole kingdom for anyone wishing to make the journey - in the Assembly Hall. It was the only part of the government building that had been finished so far. The only part of the old palace that was structurally sound enough to be rebuilt upon the foundations rather than completely starting over as had been the case for the rest. The hall was the furthest from the kitchens, the least touched by the fires that destroyed the palace that night. And now it acted as the meeting hall for the newly formed government but also something rather all purpose for now. Will had seen the plans, someday the Assembly House would be a grand building for the elected representatives Will had insisted begin this new reign of the kingdom.

Now, as fireworks lit the sky, Katz kissed Freddie and the music reached a fever pitch, Will was ready to take Hannibal back to the cottage that had once been for the gatekeeper but was now their home. A short walk, and yet he wondered if he could keep his hands off the man long enough to make it.

Since the night they slew Francis, they had been casually intimiate with each other - kissing and light touches - but never more. Hannibal allowed him this despite his clear hunger. When they spent time together, which was a high frequency, they were always touching - hands clasped together, or light fingers on the other's leg. Small intimate touches that were hardly enough, not least because of quite how deeply they were both falling in love.

As Hannibal's upturned face was lit by another firework exploding over the lake, Will leaned to him, speaking close to his ear so that no one else would hear.

“Thank you for allowing me the time to know you. To… fall in love with you… I...!” Words failed him and Hannibal’s expression was a wry grin as the omega turned to him.

“You have married me twice now Will, are you telling me that you no longer wish to take it slow?”

Will stifled a laugh, along with the urge to drag the omega straight to their cabin. Instead he cleared his throat, his voice still coming out in a low growl, “Once we stood by this lake and you told me any wrestling between us would end in your favour. Shall we test that hypothesis?”

When Hannibal turned to face him his grin was sharp and his eyes were blown with lust. Will chuckled despite the little shiver that ran over him. Tonight he would finally mate his twice wed omega. His husband.

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One Year Later

“Hannibal, I…” Will struggled to get out the words, which were only to be an admonishment anyway so he wasn’t sure it served anything to do so. It rarely did any good to argue with his husband, much less when the man was pushing himself so enthusiastically back on his cock.

“Please… alpha…”

Will clenched his jaw, knowing it was a manipulation but still powerless to resist Hannibal’s use of those words.

“Unfff” Will grunted and took hold of Hannibal’s hips, of course this had perhaps become inevitable the moment they had both shed their clothes at the side of the lake. The omega - *his* omega - braced his hands on the tree in front of him and let out a hum of pleasure that was as much about getting his own way as convincing Will to knot him.

It wasn’t as if it was the first time they’d had sex in the woods, but Will preferred to keep their knotting behind closed doors, given that they could be tied for up to forty minutes.

But how could he deny his pregnant husband whose sexual appetite seemed to be growing at a greater speed than their child.

His grip firm, Will thrust deep into Hannibal, enjoying the breathless little noises now that his mate was being lost to his pleasure. He felt the exquisite pressure as Hannibal's entrance practically kissed at his knot, wet and willing. Will rocked his hips, keeping his groin tight to Hannibal as he began to push in.

"Yes, Will… please…" Hannibal begged as he teased his knot against Hannibal's tightness.

Hannibal cried out, his whole body tensing as Will pushed his knot inside, feeling Hannibal grip immediately around him as he came - hot splashes of omega come marking the tree.

"Woah… you really did need my knot." Will breathlessly observed.

Hannibal nodded, completely unable to speak as he leaned forward on his arms at the same time as pressing back onto the knot. A little whimper escaping as he did so.

Will resumed shallow thrusts, now tied to his omega, shallow was all their bodies allowed. But it was enough, Hannibal's muscles were still lightly spasming around him and just knowing Hannibal's consuming desire for him was enough to painfully arouse him. It took only a handful of thrusts before he tensed and spilled, grunting as he did so.

He panted as he emptied himself, lasting several minutes as his knot throbbed and Hannibal whined. Finally his flow stopped and took a breath. His knot was incredibly hard, it hadn't been this swollen in a while - it was likely going to take a whole forty minutes to subside.

"Move down my love," Will encouraged, helping Hannibal forward and down, onto the soft, moss covered bed of the woods. There Hannibal was able to lie down with Will easing him onto his side, now spooned behind him and fully seated inside him.

Hannibal murmured something and seemed to be falling into a satisfied slumber.

Will chuckled and shook his head.

Hannibal was supposed to be heading to the Assembly, he was a member of government - in charge of relations with the east - and needed to begin training his aide Chiyoh for once the baby arrived and he would not be as readily available. Being late was certainly not a good example to set, but inevitable now. Chances were high that the Assembly would end up sending Freddie or some other of their staff to see if Hannibal needed assistance in getting to the Assembly Hall. He really didn't want Bev's wife to find them knotted against a tree...

Will stroked a hand over Hannibal's hip before smoothing it over the taut and soft skin of Hannibal's belly - the bump where their baby grew. All concerns fading away but for the thoughts of that little one -

A child that would never be heir to the throne - a strangely comforting thought, Will found.

A child born from an arrangement, but conceived out of love.

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